The Yorkshire Haunts of Captain Cook

by

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When Jane asked me to contribute something to this conference, I was flattered and excited. Then the initial euphoria wore off and was replaced by the dull misery of trying to think of WHAT to talk about. I soon realized that the task so blithely assented to was no easy one. How could I get up before a group of philosophers and scholars and hope to say anything which didn't smack of the rankest of presumption? Cook's voyages, the geographical discoveries, botany, navigation, nutrition, even microbiology. . . all these have been dissected and fought over and the pitiful remains again contended for; all have come under the withering scrutiny of experts with whom I have good reason to fear comparison. Therefore, in eventually deciding to give you my thoughts, such as they are, on the Yorkshire haunts of Capt. Cook, I'm hoping to merely chisel out a modest nook in which my academic shortcomings will not be quite so uncomfortably apparent. If the pressure gets too hot I can always plead temporary insanity and lapse into that most recondite of dialects, Broad Yorkshire. The fact that my mother is in the audience today, though, means that I have to watch my p's and q's even in that direction! I wrote a few disconnected remarks for a newspaper article and fondly imagined until recently that all I should have to do would be to pick up the sheet, adjust my spectacles, give one of <u>those</u> coughs that means a lot and says nothing, fix the house with my glittering eye and bring it to heel with one of <u>those</u> looks that

says a lot and means nothing, and begin. Well, it hasn't worked out that way. Partly because I don't want to affect the sales of the newspaper article (which is on sale in the lobby at 50 cents) by giving away its contents free, and partly because even I had qualms about putting old wine in new bottles and watering it withal, this show is all new, as they say on the stage. I hope you like it.

> "Often I made my way by narrow mountain tracks at astonishing heights, seeing a few small cottages nestling deep down in the dale beneath. The grey stone walls that bounded the fields gave the whole district a wild aspect. . . . " (Carl Philip Moritz, "Journeys of a German in England," 1782.)

> ". . . through Yorkshire Dales
> Among the rocks and winding scars
> Where deep and low the hamlets lie,
> Beneath their little patch of sky
> And little lot of stars. . . ." (Wordsworth)

Apart from the "astonishing" heights, which should certainly have no reason to amaze a German familiar with the more modest mountains of his own country, these descriptions are as true of parts of Yorkshire as when Cook was alive. It is still a wild and rather remote upland region where little has changed, flanked and in some places invaded by the blight of industrialization and the scourge of ill-considered modernity. For sensitive lovers of country life, of folklore and place-names, it is peerless. Every beck and bank, every road and rigg, all conjure up a twilight world of occult mystery. Just listen to the magnificent euphony of some of these ancient names:

> Waterfalls-- Nentforce, Ashguildforce, Highforce, Cauldron Snout, Catarakeforce, Kisdonforce, Cautleyspout, and Hardowforce.
> Caves -- Doukybottom, Calfhole Cave, Stump Cross, Jinglepot, Hurtlepot, and Gaping Gill Hole.
> Rivers --Aire, Hodder, Wharfe, Skirfare, Nidd, Ure, Swale, Lune, Washburn, Ouse, Calder, Donn, Rye, and Greta.
> Rock Features -- Stauwerd Peel, The Sneep, High Cup Nick, Falcon Clints, Cronkley Scar, Stenkrith Gorge, Kisdon Gorge, Gordale

> Scar, Kilnsey Crag, Houstean, Brimham Rocks, The Strid, Trowgill, and Moughton Nab.

There are others more mysterious yet, whose origins are lost in the past, that commemorate deeds and people long forgotten: Jenny Brewster's Spring, Fanny's Folly, the Stone Lad, Solomon's Temple, the White Way (the prehistoric route of salt-traders), Devil's Arrows. . . What mystic power permeates the names of Boggle Hole, Saltburn, Monk Bretton, Murk Mire Moor, Nab End, Winter Gill, Noodle Hill! Other names hint at a darker side: What ancient tragedy lies enshrined in Sorrows Beck? Bad Lane leads into Thief Street, where the notorious highwayman Dick Turpin, with whom people of Cook's parents' generation were all too uncomfortably familiar, used to lie in wait for travellers. We are in a land of magic.

Perhaps the most important thing to realize about the Yorkshire of Cook's day is the turbulence of its history, testified to by its rich tapestry of place-names. . . Norse, Celtic, Roman, Angle, Scottish, Saxon, Norman, Danish. . . . It was a frontier province, barely subdued after great and bloody uprisings, kept down by force. . . a constant thorn in the side of the government in London. It had many of the overtones of the American wild West. In order to bring this across, I shall have to go into the history of the period just a bit. But now I want to bring in an unashamed aside, first to bring a little comfort to those of you who came in the insane hope of finding something interesting going on, and second to show the astonishing continuity and broad, sweeping cadences of folk culture and tradition over vast periods of time.

Some years ago I used to go round with a tape-recorder collecting the reminiscences of old people. Now, I believe, this has a much more portentous title. . . oral history. We never troubled to think of titles

then; (we called it "collecting the reminiscences of old people") but it was the same thing. I did most of my interviewing in pubs. There were two reasons for this, one obvious, one not so obvious. The less obvious was that in familiar yet "neutral" surroundings the subjects were much less "uptight" as they say in America and the huge amount of alcohol in English beer soon made them loquacious, garrulous even. (This occasionally caused problems if one only had a limited supply of tape.) By the bye, for oral history fans, I found it a useful idea to set up our recording in a pub because the landlord could usually be bribed to let us conceal a microphone beforehand, a technique that works wonders in removing self-consciousness from the subject. I used a cordless mic mounted in a beer bottle, while an assistant across the room operated the recorder. It worked as long as the subject could be restrained from pouring the microphone into his glass. Anyway, there I was with an old gentleman of eighty years, whose ancestors had farmed this region down from the drifting mists of time, or as the Common Law of England so elegantly puts it, "when the remembrance of men runneth not to the contrary." The conversation got round to a great black and mysterious forest nearby, said by the countryfolk to be the home of goblins, sprites and elves. It had not always been a forest insisted the old man. Many years ago, long before the time of his great-grandfather, it had been prosperous farmland scattered with villages. His grandfather had told him that all this had been destroyed in a single week. "Who caused the destruction?" I asked. The old man looked confidential, peered elaborately around to be sure we were not overheard, and in an urgent undertone said: "Willy Norman burned it all." It was an amazing cultural throwback, a triumphant testament to the tenacity of folk memory. The old farmer was repeating stories told

in his family for generations. He neither knew nor cared who "Willy Norman" was, but here, in this ancient legend, kept burning like a flickering light down the years, was an account of the pitiless harrying of Northern England by William, Duke of Normandy, in the late eleventh century.

That was neither the first nor the last bitter period of turmoil and violence Yorkshire had to face. The Romans sent a huge force to attack the great citadel of the Celtic Brigantes near the modern market town of Stanwick. Increasing turbulence made it necessary to construct a mighty wall across Northumberland during the early third century A.D. to keep out the wild tribes beyond. The wall still stands. To those who might ever be in Europe, let me recommend it as one of the most magnificent experiences in the continent. I have hiked mile after mile along worn Roman roads that thrust their way arrow-straight through the silent hills. Occasionally one meets a lone shepherd, but generally old stone crosses marking the way (and usually bearing a weathered sixteenth or seventeenth century inscription) and the black-faced sheep and the inconsolable desolation of the moaning wind are one's only companions. Then you come to a tiny sprawling hamlet, beetle-browed houses of moorland stone cluttered promiscuously around some road-junction or beck, just as the mist creeps along the ground and the darkness becomes palpable. The lights are just going up in the pub, usually one of those wonderful, ancient, low-beamed places with blackened walls and alluring names . . . . "The Flask," "The Fox and Hounds," "The Foxgloves," "The Ings," and "Hob O' the Hill." It is a precious moment. But I digress.

After Roman Britain went down in noise and violence and blood, there was a confused period during which several Germanic tribes fought among

themselves for supremacy. Then it was the turn of the Danes, whose influence permeates everything . . . place-names, folklore, and all else. No sooner had the Danes been absorbed -- they were too powerful to conquer -- and some semblance of unity had been built up between the warring states, when another group of Scandinavian extraction invaded from France in defense of the claim to the throne of their leader, known endearingly to his contemporaries as William the Bastard. From the eleventh century to the time of Cook, the North bore the brunt of repeated invasions and rebellions. The whole of Yorkshire is punctuated with battlegrounds . . . Towton, Stamford Bridge, Marston Moor, Winwaed. . . and mighty frowning castles to keep the populace in terrified subjection. Uprisings were savagely put down again and again. In 1715, 13 years before Cook was born, and again in 1745, when he was seventeen, the Scots invaded and laid waste the North. The second time it was so serious that the government in London had packed its bags and was preparing for craven flight. This is a tombstone inscription from Whitby Parish Church:

> "To the memory of Peregrin Lasells of His Majesty's Forces, who served his country from the year 1706. In the reign of Queen Anne, he served in Spain and performed the duty of a brave and gallant officer. In the rebellion of the year 1715, he served in Scotland and in that of 1745, after a fruitless exertion of his spirit and ability, at the disgraceful rout, Prestonpans, he remained forsaken on the field."

Prestonpans was one of the greatest embarrassments to English arms in the entire eighteenth century. Sir John Cope, incompetent, corrupt, fainthearted, was sent with three regiments of foot and two of horse to deal with the rebels. He spent most of his time trying to avoid meeting them, and with appalling roads his luck held until this disastrous encounter. The Duke of Cumberland eventually put down the rising with ferocious brutality, and then the English government grudgingly disbursed money for the

building of military roads. I have a couple of awesome statistics for you.

1600 years after the Romans had left Britain, General Wade took three days to march from Hexham to Newcastle. On the Roman roads it would have taken a Roman legion eight hours. As late as the 1770's, announcements for the Edinburgh to London mail coach were hopefully anticipating arrival in the capital in eight days "if God wills it." It was not uncommon for advertisements to be posted requesting information on the whereabouts of travellers who had set out and never arrived. Your chances of getting from York, say, to London, without your coach being involved in some kind of encounter with the "gentlemen of the road " weren't too high. Even the name that society bestowed on these brigands smacks of sneaking envy and approval . . . perhaps jealousy that someone else had the sang froid to escape from a drab and wearisome lot by means that most shied away from. Dick Turpin had a good deal of the picaresque about him; dozens of old inns vie with each other in claiming to have been his hideout; when he was executed at York in 1739 he immediately became something of a folk-hero.

In the days before an organized police force, the government, driven to the defensive by waves of violent crime, responded with insensate barbarism whenever a criminal was apprehended. Interesting to the social psychologist is the flood of mournful tracts and apologia supposedly written by the criminal, confessing to his crime and warning other potential wrongdoers of the terrible fate in store for them. These amazing products of popular culture, always describing the crimes in lurid detail, always harping on the good nature of the wrongdoer before he was seduced by evil company, always brimming with didactic morality and mawkish sentiment, enjoyed a huge circulation until the abolition of public hangings. Another

curious and unsavory product of public fascination was the series of cheap pottery figures depicting famous murderers that poured from the Staffordshire factories to an eager and indiscriminating market.

I am told that in talks like this, one must always have "points." So, if my first "point" was the turbulent history, remoteness and political instability of Northern England in the eighteenth century, my second, I guess, is the vast change that lay waiting over the horizon. Let us not, for goodness' sake, be misty-eyed about this area in this period of history. It was a time and a place of hardship and squalor and privation. Put out of your mind the Christmas card scenes of jolly, chubby-cheeked clay pipe smoking squires telling yarns in the chimney corners of thatch-roofed country inns. The primordial throb of ancient England, with its ghosts, elves and demons, dark rituals and gaunt, threatening megaliths ran cheek-by-jowl with the impending sunburst that would change England more in a century than in the previous two thousand years. What we now call (not entirely accurately) the Industrial Revolution would rush into these quiet valleys and fill them with violent pulsating throbbing noise, pounding, flailing machinery and black chimneys rolling out smoke. The Industrial Revolution was basically a northern phenomenon, based upon coal, china clay, iron ore, and the deep water ports of Yorkshire and Lancashire. The lifetimes of Capt. Cook and his wife span almost this entire age. When Cook was born in 1728, it was not altogether unusual for a whole mail coach to disappear into holes in the road. By the time Mrs. Cook died in 1835, huge viaducts were snaking across the countryside. England was moving irrevocably onwards into a mechanistic world.

The population, at the time of Cook's birth, was estimated at around

five million; by the 1830's it was 13 million. In the old order, dating from the Middle Ages, working folk were taught to admire their betters; it was a habit that Cook never quite got out of. As the pressure of the new industrialization and the new bursting population growth brought problems that the time honored formulae of the village squire and the local parson and the parish beadle's lockup failed to cope with, the government was baffled. What had been lost was the neat interlocking of social elements into a traditionally ordained pattern. Public utilities hardly existed; it was all private enterprise and private goodwill. Suddenly, with catastrophic rapidity, all this was to change. Medieval England, accustomed to centuries of comfortable somnolence, was precipitated out of bed and made to stand on its head. The massed-up impetus of the Italian Renaissance, of the seventeenth century's discoveries in the field of science, of the vast geographical discoveries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and of recent dramatic inventions, had been slowly oozing through and suddenly burst the dam to hit rural England in the mid-eighteenth century. It was a resounding shock.

If Cook stands at the meeting place of two worlds, the European and the Polynesian, he also stands at the brink of two time frames. One is medieval England with its self-sufficient household economies, its rigid social orders and intense conservatism, and the other is a modern age of breathtaking promise. The fact that this promise has not brought us any more happiness in real terms than was probably possessed by the simple country folk of Cook's day should not make us forget how blinding the vision was. Along with Cook, to symbolize this change, one of the most fundamental changes in all human affairs, I should pick the name of John Harrison, Yorkshire carpenter, indomitable pioneer, doughty and petulant eccentric.

I haven't time to talk about Harrison now; in fact, I haven't even time to talk about the Yorkshire haunts of Captain Cook, which is what I came to talk about, but I would like to squeeze him in, although I'm sure that in these days of digital read-outs for $12.95, you won't be impressed.

Without guidance, without experience, Harrison set himself the task of building the world's first chronometer, the first clock to tell accurate time at sea. One or two of these slides show Harrison's clocks. When he started to work, he was in his twenties. When he finished, he was in his eighties and almost blind. Harrison's lifetime, even more than Cook's, spans the old world and the new. Once navigators had the chronometer, ocean voyaging became comparatively simple. . . I say, comparatively. There were still terrifying problems. But we have lost the scale, grandeur, and sheer pigheaded audacious courage of the early voyagers. It is inconceivable to us, as we look out of the window of a 747, that the pilot could be in any doubt as to where he is. And yet the whole of modern navigation that we take so much for granted is based firmly on the work of Harrison as first put into effect by Cook.

So, friends, let us now praise famous men and our fathers who begat us. I'm pleased that those who didn't fall asleep crept out quietly so as not to disturb those who did. What of all this, would Cook remember today? Not much, and that is why, I suppose, I took refuge in conveying atmosphere to eke out an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.

Certainly, there are hundreds of places. . . castles, abbeys, churches, houses -- which were standing when Cook was born and are standing now. It's much more than likely that he knew many of them, that he knew York Minster intimately, that he was familiar with the building that now houses the York Museum (because he would have had to go there to get his seaman's inden-

tures), that he visited Sheriff Hutton Castle (only a mile or two away), that he worshipped in St. Mary's Church in Whitby. In Scarborough there's a magnificent ruined castle and a quite amazing old house close to the harbor. It used to be a tavern and is said to have been slept in by King Richard the Third. Certainly by Cook's day, it was already over four hundred years old. The probability is overwhelming that Cook knew it. It's possible, perhaps even very likely, that he visited the romantic monuments of Yorkshire, the somber ruined castles and roofless abbeys and barbaric pagan monuments, but the trouble is we have not one shred of evidence for it. If we are seeking the Yorkshire haunts of Captain Cook in their strictest definition, then the record is meager indeed.

There is the sea, of course. Everything begins and ends on the storm-lashed or mist-shrouded coast that trained so many generations of hardy and resolute seafarers. We know that Cook was in the coal trade as a young man; we know the name of the ship (the Freelove), its owners (John and Henry Walker of Whitby), and sundry other details, but of Cook's personal itinerary we know next to nothing. It's a bitter pill to swallow that we know little about Cook's early life and are likely to discover very little more. Beaglehole's biography is 750 pages long but our hero has reached 17 years of age by page five. Of the country seats of the gentry to whom Cook doubtless touched his cap, we have all we could wish. We can trace the minor domestic perambulations of my lord X or my lady Y with almost embarassing completeness, and yet apart from the logs, journals, charts and documents which Mrs. Cook regarded as public property, we have next to nothing of James Cook himself. It is almost too much to take.

So briefly then, to have done. We can assume that Cook visited York, Borough Bridge, Richmond and the other market towns for the area, that he

drank in taverns that still stand, looked at historic buildings that still exist, much as a modern tourist might do. As far as documentary proof goes though, that is a different matter. The cottage he was born in was torn down shortly afterward. The monument marking its site is a much later erection. At Great Lyton where Cook went to school, there is a partial survival. The old school, built in 1704 from the bequest of Michael Postgate remains as a pitiful shell, insensitively modernized. The little stone house of Cook's father was transported in the 1930's to Australia and now stands, apparently forlorn and neglected in the center of a Melbourne public park. Cook undoubtedly used the ancient "Beggar's Bridge" over the River Esk, traditionally built in fulfillment of a vow by a frustrated lover who could not get across the river to see his sweetheart at a critical moment. It is a lovely spot and worth a moment's contemplation.

When we move to Staithes, there is a little more hope. Here Cook was apprenticed to a linen draper. Don't let "Capt. Cook's Shop" fool you; package tours brought that about -- the real McCoy is somewhere under the North Sea. Part of the old "Cod and Lobster" Inn where Cook's employer used to drink is still preserved.

In Whitby we are close to the spirit, if not to the manifest remains, of the era that Cook knew. There are fragments here and there; the old house of his employers in Grape Lane, the funny old church that he certainly visited, the abbey. . . but none of these are documented. It is an English characteristic that prophets receive even less honor in their country than elsewhere. The only contemporary monument to Cook, erected by his friend Sir Hugh Palliser, is at present standing forgotten in some dusty storehouse of the National Coal Board. I didn't want to quote from it anyway, because

it's rather pretentious. Instead, I want to end with the real Cook; the sea, the ships, the Yorkshire coast. On the monument at Whitby is the inscription:

> "For the lasting memory of a great Yorkshire seaman this bronze has been cast, and is left in the keeping of Whitby, the birthplace of those good ships that bore him on his enterprises, brought him to glory, and left him at rest."

I would be hard put to think of a tribute more simple, touching, or profound.